

Politics+Policy

A look at the people, events and ideas that shape state and local government.

OBSERVER

By Ryan Holeywell



A Roundabout Solution

For many people, the term “roundabout” brings to mind Chevy Chase and the movie *National Lampoon’s European Vacation*. There’s that famous scene where Chase’s character, Clark Griswold, enters a London traffic circle during daylight, and by nightfall is still driving in a loop, laughing hysterically at his inability to exit.

But then, there’s Mayor James Brainard of Carmel, Ind. For him, roundabouts—the one- to two-lane circular intersections—conjure up images of a city free of traffic lights.

Brainard’s effort is garnering national attention, and by the end of the summer, the Indianapolis suburb will have 60 intersection roundabouts with another 35 to go before the project is complete. “You can drive for miles in your car without coming to a stoplight and without having to stop,” Brainard says of the city.

Today, roundabouts are more popular than ever—and not just in Carmel. In 1997, there were only about 200-300 roundabouts in the country. That number has increased tenfold, says Gene Russell, professor emeritus at the Center for Transportation Research and

Training at Kansas State University. Communities in Colorado, Kansas, Maryland and Washington are among those leading the way. Their popularity is largely due to the safety benefits of the configurations.

It’s nearly impossible to have a head-on or T-bone collision when using the roadways, and collisions that do happen tend to occur at much lower speeds. Other benefits of roundabouts include reduced fuel consumption, due to a lack of idling, and a construction cost that is at least \$150,000 less than installing traffic lights.

Brainard’s inspiration for roundabouts comes from his days attending graduate school abroad in the early 1980s and seeing the prevalence of roundabouts in England and France. “Why do we have to go to Europe to have cities like that?” Brainard says.

Still, roundabouts have their obstacles—mainly, explaining them to drivers. When the roundabout first arrived in Carmel, the city ran constant public service announcements instructing residents how to use them. That didn’t stop a recent out-of-towner from driving the wrong way through one. Russell says roundabouts are often the victim of “irrational myths” and fears. Cue the Chevy Chase movie. That’s not how roundabouts work in the real world, he says. “For a single-lane roundabout, it’s pretty hard to screw it up.” **G**